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ABSTRACT

In foreign language testing, as in all testing, validity is the primary criterion for test quality. However plausible the concept of validity, in practice it is not always easy to arrive at congruence between the test situation and the real-life situation the learner is expected to master. Some language educators make authenticity a major criterion of test quality. However, complete congruence of test and real-life situation is impossible, and there are other considerations than authenticity in testing. A language test as a social event essentially different from any other social event in which the learner will need to use the language. The solution is to find a reasonable balance between authenticity and abstraction in tests. Pragmatics, with its analyses of speech acts and their characteristics, can be helpful in finding the right degree of abstraction for testing. Examples of such test items include a series of sentences of which portions are illegible and the learner must supply appropriate words, or a paired or group activity in which students must elicit information from each other to complete a common task such as a survey or map completion. (MSE)

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Peter Doyé

Authenticity in foreign language testing

1. Validity of foreign language tests

Classical psychometric theory has taught us to evaluate the quality of educational tests by a number of basic criteria, such as validity, reliability, economy and utility. Although the characteristics of a good test can be classified in many different ways, test specialists are in general agreement that the criteria just named are the ones that any test producer or user should have in mind when making or applying a test.

They also agree that among the criteria mentioned above validity is the most important, for unless a test is valid it has no function. The validity of a test depends on the degree to which it measures what it is supposed to measure. A good test must serve the purpose that it is intended for, otherwise it is useless. However reliable the results may be, however objective the scoring may be, if the test does not measure what the test user wants to know it is irrelevant.

In our context most of the test users are foreign language teachers who want to know how well their students have learnt the foreign language. For this purpose they employ tests. My phrase "how well the students have learnt the foreign language" disguises the complexity of the task. In the past 20 or 30 years we have all learnt to accept communicative competence as the overall aim of foreign language instruction. Students are supposed to learn to understand and use the foreign language for purposes of communication. This general aim can, of course, be broken down into a number of competencies in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

In most countries the school curricula for foreign language instruction are formulated in terms of communicative competencies, and a logical consequence of this is that also testing is organized according to these competencies. This approach to testing has been called the "curricular approach". The foreign language curriculum is taken as the basis for the construction of foreign language tests. On the assumption that the actual teaching follows the content prescriptions laid down in the curriculum it seems plausible also to determine the content of the tests on the basis of the curriculum. This takes us back to the concept of validity. If the

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If the content of a test correspondes to the content prescribed by the curriculum it is said to possess "curricular validity" or "content validity".

2. Authenticity

However plausible the concept of content validity may be, in practice it presents a number of problems. One of these problems is the congruence of the test situation and the real life situation that the learner is supposed to master according to the curriculum. It is on this problem of congruence that I wish to concentrate in my talk. The problem has been described very aptly by Edward Cureton in his article on Validity in Lindquist's well-known book on Educational Measurement:

> If we want to find out how well a person can perform a task, we can put him to work at that task, and observe how well he does it and the quality and quantity of the product he turns out. Whenever a test performance is anything other than a representative performance of the actual task, we must inquire further concerning the degree to which the test operations as performed upon the test materials in the test situation agree with the actual operations as performed upon the actual materials in the situation normal to the task. One way to do this is to make detailed logical and psychological analyses of both the test and the task. From such analyses we may be able to show that many or most of the test operations and materials are identical with or very much like many or most of those of the task, and that the test situation is intrinsically similar to that of the task. On the basis of this demonstration it might be reasonable to conclude that the test is sufficiently relevant to the task for the purpose at issue.[1]

Let us try to apply the ideas expressed in this passage to a very common task that is to be found in any foreign language curriculum: Asking the way in an English speaking environment.

If we want to find out whether students are able to perform this speech act the safest way would be to take them to an English speaking town,

place them in a situation where they actually have to ask the way and see whether they perform the task successfully and to which degree of perfection. We all know that this is hardly ever possible, except for language courses that are being held in an English speaking country. In the great majority of cases the teaching and learning of English takes place in a non-English environment. Therefore the second case mentioned by Cureton comes up when the tester tries to invent a realistic situation in which the learners have to perform operations congruent with the ones they would have to perform in situations normal to the task. Absolute congruence would exist when the tasks in the test situation and in the corresponding real-life situation would actually be identical. In this extreme case the test situation and the tasks in it are called authentic. An authentic test is therefore one that reproduces a real-life situation in order to examine the student's ability to cope with it.

There are authors who make authenticity one of the decisive characteristics of a good test. They derive it from the generally accepted criterion of validity and regard authenticity as the most important aspect of validity in foreign-language testing.

To quote just one author who takes this view: Brendan J. Carroll:

> The issue of <u>authenticity</u> must always be an important aspect of any discussion on language testing. A full application of the principle of authenticity would mean that all the tasks undertaken should be real-life, interactive communicative operations and not the typical routine examination responses to the tester's 'stimuli', or part of a stimulus-response relationship; that the language of the test should be day-to-day discourse, not edited or doctored in the interests of simplification but presented with all its expected irregularities; that the contexts of the interchanges are realistic, with the ordinary interruptions, background noises and irrelevancies found in the airport or lecture-room; and that the rating of a performance, based on its effectiveness and adequacy as a communicative response, will rely on non-verbal as well as verbal criteria.[2]

Brendan Carroll's whole book can be seen as one great attempt to ensure authenticity in language testing.

3. Limits to authenticity

It is at this point that I begin to have my doubts. However useful the postulation of authenticity as one criterion among others may be, it is certainly also useful to keep in mind that (a) a complete congruence of test situation and real-life situation is impossible and that (b) there are other demands that necessarily influence our search for optimal forms of testing and therefore relativize our attempt to construct authentic tests.

Re (a) Why is a complete congruence of test situation and real-life situation impossible? The answer is simple: because a language test is a social event that has - as one of its characteristics - the intention to examine the competence of language learners. In D. Pickett's words: "By the virtue of being a test, it is a special and formalised event distanced from real life and structured for a praticular purpose. By definition it cannot be the real life it is probing."[3]

The very fact that the purpose of a test is to find out whether the learner is capable of performing a language task distinguishes it considerably from the corresponding performance of this task outside the test situation. Even if we succeed in manipulating the testees to accept the illocutionary point of a speech act they are supposed to perform, they will, in addition, always have in mind the other illocutionary point that is inherent in a test, namely to prove that they are capable of doing what is demanded of them.

An example of a test that examines the students' competence in asking for a piece of information: Even if by skilful arrangement we manage to lead the students to actually wanting this piece of information, they will always have another purpose of their verbal activity in mind which is: I will show you, teacher, that I am able to ask for information!

Re (b) The other obstacle on the way to perfect authenticity is an economic one. Through a test we want to get as much information about a person's communicative competence as possible. The greater the area of competence we cover by giving a particular test, the better. This requires a certain amount of abstraction from situational specifics. To use the example of Asking the Way: What we wish to know is how well the students can perform the speech act of Asking the Way in a variety of real-life situations - and the more the better - and not whether they can perform this act in the particular situation of a particular English city where they are looking for just one building in a specific street in a certain quarter of that city. However, we have to embed our task in a realistic setting that contains all these specifications in order to be plausible to the students. But this does not mean that we have to include all the incidentals that might be properties of such a real-life situation. On the contrary: the more incidentals we include, the more we move away from the general concept of Asking the Way as most of these incidentals might not be present in the majority of other situations where "asking the way" is demanded. Therefore we need not be sorry if we do not succeed in making a test situation absolutely authentic by providing all the peculiarities, background noises, hesitations, interruptions, social constraints by which a real-life communicative situation is characterized. We should endeavour to employ just the amount of realism that makes it understandable and plausible, but no more. The fact that we want to know how well the students master the essentials of our speech act requires abstraction from incidentals. Pickett gives the example of a simple arithmetic problem:

> If you are asked to find the area of a field 50 metres x 200 metres you do not have to get up and walk all over the field with a tape measure. You will not be concerned with whether it is bounded by a hedge or a fence, whether it is pasture or planted, whether it is sunny or wet, or whether it is Monday or Thursday. These incidentals are irrelevant to the task of measurement, for which the basic information is ready to hand, and we know that the solution will not be affected by weather, time, cultivation, perimeter markings or any of the other factors which form part of our real-life perception of any particular field. The concept of area is an abstraction from all possible perceptions and is a constant.[4]

We have to concede that the decision about what are irrelevant incidentals is easier to make in the case of an arithmetic problem than in a communicative task, as communicative performance is always embedded in concrete situations with a number of linguistic as well as non-linguistic elements. But the arithmetic problem and the communicative task have one thing in common: Normally, i.e. outside the artificial classroom setting, they occur in real-life situations that are characterized by a small number of essential features and a great number of incidentals which differ considerably from one situation to the next. And if we want to grasp the essential features of a task, we have to abstract from the incidentals. In this respect abstraction is the counter-point to authenticity in testing.

What is needed is the right balance between authenticity and abstraction. We want a fair amount of authenticity but not so much as to obscure the essential properties of the speech act in question, which by virtue of being essentials obtain in all its manifestations. In this context, the findings of modern pragmatics can be of great help, I think. Its analyses of speech acts have demonstrated that every speech act has its own specific structure with certain characteristic features. It is on these characteristics that we have to concentrate if we wish to test the learners' competence in performing this particular act.

4. Examples

Let us take "Asking for Information" as an example. In his classical book "Speech Acts. An essay in the philosophy of language" John Searle has developed a systematic procedure for the description of speech acts, in which he presents the characteristic features of each act in terms of four kinds of conditions that are necessary and sufficient for the successful and non-defective performance of each act. The speech act of "asking for information" or simply "question" is one of the examples that Searle uses himself.

The essential characteristic of a question is that it counts as an attempt to elicit information from a hearer. The two preparatory conditions for the performance of a question are that the speaker does not know the

answer and that it is not obvious that the hearer will provide the information without being asked. The propositional content of a question depends on what information the speaker needs, of course.

Now, we all know that teaching as well as testing the ability to ask questions is often practised in a way that disregards these conditions. A very common way is to present a number of sentences in which certain parts are underlined and to invite the students to ask for these parts.

Example 1

Holburne Museum is situated in Pulteney Street.
It belongs to the University of Bath.
It is open daily from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Mr. Green works in the Museum library.
He goes there every second morning.
He gets there by bus No. 32.
It takes him right to the main entrance.

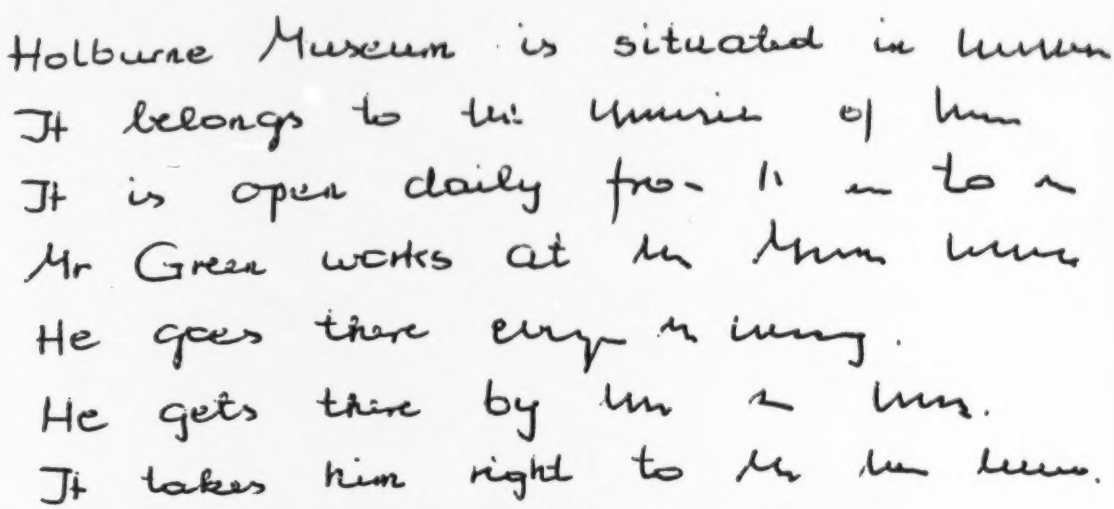
This procedure is often used for the simple reason that it is easy to prepare, to administer and to score. But it very obviously violates the essential rules that govern the performance of a question. First of all, the speech act demanded cannot be regarded as an attempt to elicit information. Secondly, the testees do very well know the answer because it is given to them in the statements. It is even underlined, which normally means that the piece of information given is especially important. - a fact that stresses the non-realistic character of the task.

And there is an additional negative feature: the procedure complicates the task for all those learners who find themselves incapable of imagining that they do not possess precisely the information that is given to them and to behave accordingly, i.e. to pretend that they need it.

To conclude: The questions that the students have to ask in this test are no questions at all. The conditions under which they have to perform their speech acts are so basically different from those of real questions that the test cannot be regarded as a means to examine the students' competence in asking questions.

Let us look at the next example which could serve as an alternative to the previous one:

Example 2


Holburne Museum is situated in
It belongs to the
It is open daily fro-
Mr Green works at
He goes there
He gets there by
It takes him right to

The difference between the two types of test is minimal on the surface, but decisive as regards the speech acts that are required to perform the task. By a very simple design, namely through replacing the underlined parts of the sentences by words that are illegibly written, the second type makes a considerable step forward in the direction of an authentic test: The questions that the learners have to ask are real questions in so far as the two main conditions of the speech act "QUESTION" as elaborated by Searle are fulfilled.

First, they can be counted as attempts to elicit information and, second, the testees do not know the answers yet. What is still missing is an addressee to whom the questions might be put. Illegible statements are quite common, but one would hardly ever try to obtain the lacking information by a list of written questions. To make this test still more realistic, one could present the statements not in writing, but in spoken form with a muffled voice that fails to be clear precisely at those points where one wishes the students to ask their questions. In this case all the essential conditions of the speech act "QUESTION" would be fulfilled. But the test is still far from being authentic.

In a real-life situation one would rarely find such a concentration of unintelligible utterances and therefore the necessity for a whole series of questions. Of course we can think of situations in which the necessity for quite a number of successive questions arises, such as in the situation of an interview or the situation of a game in which two partners need certain information from one another in order to complete a common task.

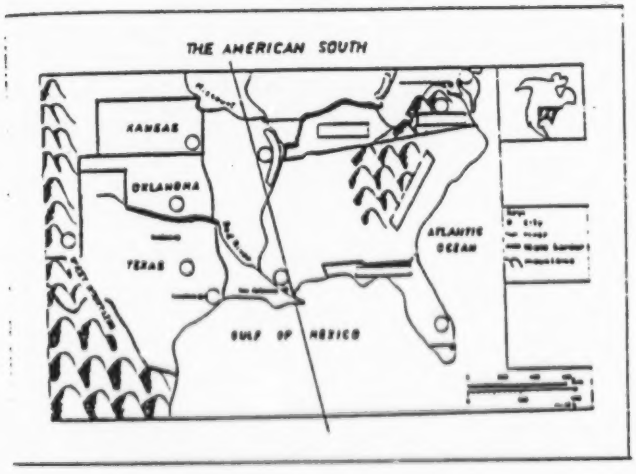
Example 3

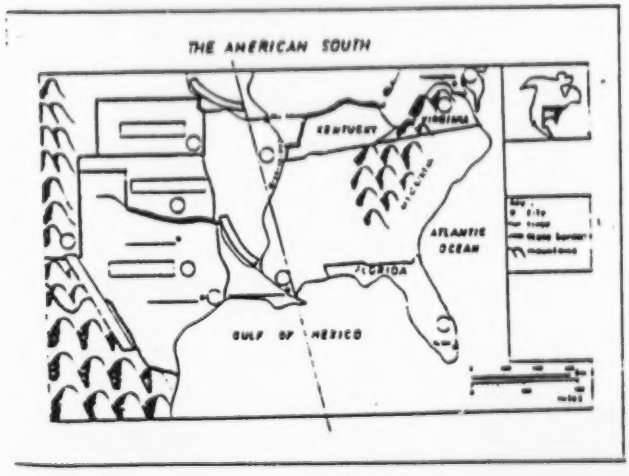
The students have to imagine a situation in which they want to find out about the working conditions of a group of people and have to ask these people a number of questions in order to make a survey.

S U R V E Y			
Q u e s t i o n	John Payne		
Job			
Number of years in job			
Payment			
Training			
No. of working hours			
Overtime			
Difficult / easy			
Like / dislike			
Holidays			
Atmosphere of work			

Example 4

The students work in pairs. They are given two incomplete maps, - one for each partner - in which certain geographical information is missing, and they have to ask each other for the missing information in order to complete their maps.[4]





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5. The balance between authenticity and abstraction

But to come back to our central problem: How far do we want to go in our efforts to create authenticity?
In the middle part of my talk, I tried to explain why absolute authenticity i.e. complete congruence between the test situation and the so-called real life situation is neither possible nor desirable.
However much, for validity's sake, we might want to achieve authenticity in our tests, any attempt to reach it will necessarily arrive at a point, where it becomes clear that there are limits to authenticity for the simple reason that a language test - by its very purpose and structure - is a social event that is essentially different from any other social event in which language is used.
Very fortunately, we need not be afraid of protests from our students. They might be better motivated if we succeed in constructing tests that are highly authentic, for then they see the practical relevance of their tasks.
On the other hand most of them see as we do that a test can never become absolutely authentic and might find the vain attempts of their teachers to create fully authentic test situations fairly ridiculous. Therefore, and for the two main reasons I have presented we should give up our efforts to achieve the impossible and be satisfied with finding the right balance between authenticity and abstraction.

1 Cureton, Edward E.: Validity
In: Lindquist, E.F. (ed.): Educational measurement, American Council on Education, Washington, D.C. 1963, p. 622.

2 Carroll, Brendan J.: Testing Communicative Performance
Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1980. p. 11f.

3 Pickett, D.: Never the Twain ...?
p. 7.

4 From: Doyé, Peter & Rampillon, Ute: Vertretungsstunden für den Englischunterricht, Hueber, München 1986, p. 43.